

The 51st Conference of the Chiefs of the American Air Forces (CONJEFAMER)

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Exercise Cooperation I

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In 2006 at their annual meeting, 45 years since its creation, commanders of member air forces of the System of Cooperation Among American Air Forces (SICOFAA) began to seriously consider innovation. The organization largely accomplished its goals of ‘integration’ and ‘improving air force – air force relations.’ What commanders wanted was a way to move beyond ‘friendship,’ a way to make the organization useful to the governments and people of its member nations. They analyzed common interests. Mother Nature had made her input time to time in the form of earthquakes and hurricanes which had routinely afflicted

SICOFAA member nations and required these same commanders to respond quickly with all available air assets. Therefore, it seemed clear to them that their most important common interest was combined air operations in support of humanitarian assistance. They set about to move beyond mere ‘friendship’ and approved the planning of SICOFAA’s first ever combined air operations exercise, Cooperation I, to be held in 2010. The Commander of the Chilean Air Force, General Ricardo Ortega, took the bold step of volunteering to host the exercise; committing his air force to expend tremendous resources; human and material, and initiate a momentous change in the focus of SICOFAA. This change, built on its previously laid foundation of integration and friendship, would allow the System to finally become not just useful, but essential to the welfare of the region’s people in the event of a disaster.

Three years in the planning, SICOFAA Exercise Cooperation I was held in Puerto Montt, Chile, hosted by the Chilean Air Force 3rd Air Brigade, 5-15 October 2010. For the first ever SICOFAA exercise, it was an unqualified success. A Combined Air Operations Center (CAOC) was established and operated for 10 days by multi-national teams of officers and NCOs. Thirteen member air forces participated with personnel, while six air forces sent aircraft. A total of over 1,800 officers, NCOs, and airmen took part in the exercise. An

important lesson learned was the need for a common operational software system which would allow planning and distribution of cargo and passengers; a system that can be used by all SICOFAA member air forces in any country.

L CONJEFAMER

Prior to Cooperation I, the SICOFAA Commanders met in Washington DC in June 2010 for the L (50th) Conference of the Chiefs of the American Air Forces (CONJEFAMER), the 50th anniversary of the organization, hosted by USAF Chief of Staff, General Norton Schwartz. During the conference the Commanders stated their interest in realizing future humanitarian air exercises, but declined to set any dates, preferring to first examine the results of Cooperation I. However, witnessing the enthusiasm of their SICOFAA Delegates, they approved the Delegates' request to dedicate the entire 2010-2011 cycle to developing official SICOFAA humanitarian support procedures. The Commanders mandated the SICOFAA Delegates suspend their normal work on themes of mutual interest suggested by the five SICOFAA committees, which meet annually, in favor of dedicating all of the SICOFAA committees in the coming year to writing a SICOFAA manual on humanitarian support procedures. (SICOFAA has traditionally sponsored five annual committees to recommend themes of mutual interest in each area: A-I - Personnel, A-II – Information, A-III – Operations, A-IV – Logistics, and A-V – Science & Technology.)

New Focus for SICOFAA

In compliance with the Commanders' direction, the SICOFAA Permanent Secretariat (SPS), which consists of the Secretary General, Subsecretary General, Editor, Executive Secretary, Administrator, and NCOIC developed a plan to divide the Delegates into working groups, each responsible for a corresponding part of the SICOFAA humanitarian support manual. Working feverishly during the five previously scheduled SICOFAA committees during the 2010-2011 cycle (June 2010-June 2011), effecting a great deal of revision and coordination by email, telephone, and video conference between meetings, SICOFAA Delegates completed the draft manual in time for the LI PREPLAN Conference, held in May in the Dominican Republic. The purpose of PREPLAN is to approve all SICOFAA recommendations for advancement to the annual meeting of SICOFAA Commanders, CONJEFAMER. The LI PREPLAN Delegates approved the manual, now officially named the "SICOFAA COMBINED AIR OPERATIONS MANUAL FOR HUMANITARIAN AID AND AID DURING DISASTERS" and sent it forward for the Commander's approval at the LI CONJEFAMER, 12-17 June in Natal, Brazil. To ensure there would be no surprises, each Delegate briefed his Commander on the manual's effort during the entire cycle, including showing the final draft just before CONJEFAMER.

In addition to writing the manual, during the 2011-2012 cycle SICOFAA Delegates analyzed the future of SICOFAA post-Cooperation I. Spurred by the SPS, the Delegates gradually adopted a new focus for SICOFAA, a focus that contemplated a transition from its

sedentary past to a future dedicated to combined air operations in support of humanitarian assistance in the region. They discussed a future in which SICOFAA, perhaps over the subsequent 10-15 years, became competent in humanitarian assistance through frequent real and virtual exercises, updating its Procedures Manual by incorporating lessons learned from each exercise. Their imagined future included a move toward 'jointness,' that is, a closer association with SICOFAA's sister organizations in the Army (Conference of American Armies, CEA), Navy (Interamerican Naval Conference, CNI) and in the Organization of American States (Interamerican Defense Board [JID]), all of whom are also making serious efforts to prepare their members for humanitarian support missions in the region. The JID holds the status of "Special Invitee" to all SICOFAA events.

In November 2010 the Delegates learned that their interest in humanitarian support was sanctioned by the Conference of American Defense Ministers (CMDA), who in its 9th Conference, held in Bolivia in November, declared their unconditional support for the following: "...la implementación de un mecanismo de colaboración entre los Ministerios de Defensa con el objeto de fortalecer las capacidades militares de asistencia humanitaria (implementing a mechanism for collaboration between the Ministries of Defense in order to strengthen the military capabilities of humanitarian assistance)...." Since the air forces are the 'firemen' of humanitarian assistance, i.e., first responders, it was clear that for SICOFAA to demonstrate its potential usefulness to the governments of the region, the time was right to shift the focus to humanitarian support.

In any serious discussion of the System's future, SICOFAA Delegates knew they were out in front of their Commanders. The Commanders, while demonstrating their desire to hold future exercises, had not yet approved any. Furthermore, no Commander had yet volunteered to host an exercise. The delegates knew that without a volunteer air force, their new focus on humanitarian support operations would fail, resulting in SICOFAA regressing to its previous "common theme with multiple committees" mentality. The SPS urged Commanders to embrace the Delegates' future operational vision for SICOFAA and come to the LI CONJEFAMER intent to volunteer to host a future exercise (live or virtual) and be willing to approve in advance to at least three cycles of SICOFAA activities, thus achieving commitment to a shared way ahead.

With this desire to cement a commitment to the System's new focus for the future, the delegates met in the LI PREPLAN conference in Punta Cana, Dominican Republic, 9-13 May 2011. After much discussion and some tense negotiation, the delegates achieved consensus on making several recommendations to their Commanders for the following month's LI CONJEFAMER. Among the several recommendations the most important were the following:

1. **New Focus.** That SICOFAA adopt a 'new focus', consisting of more effort on humanitarian support operations and less on 'common themes'.

2. **Exercises.** That SICOFAA commit to hold humanitarian support air exercises every other year (rotating between virtual and live exercises) and commit to do so in the subsequent three cycles (2012-2013, 2013-2014, 2014-2015).
3. **The Manual.** That the Commanders approve the use of the “SICOFAA COMBINED AIR OPERATIONS MANUAL FOR HUMANITARIAN AID AND AID DURING DISASTERS” for the planning of future exercises, with the understanding that after each exercise the delegates will update the manual and after two exercises, will request the Commanders officially approve the updated manual.
4. **Strategic Plan.** That the SICOFAA Strategic Plan be updated so that it reflects the transition from an organization whose focus is integration to one whose focus is combined air operations.
5. **Jointness.** That SICOFAA invite the CEA and CNI to participate as observers in SICOFAA exercises. That SICOFAA participate, when invited, in JID humanitarian support exercises, and that SICOFAA investigate incorporation in the CNI-sponsored Integrated Telecommunications Network of the Armed Forces of the Americas (RETIFAA).

Armed with these recommendations from PREPLAN, the delegates prepared for the LI CONJEFAMER eager that their Commanders would fully support their new focus for SICOFAA.

LI CONJEFAMER

The LI CONJEFAMER was held at the Serhs Intercontinental Hotel in Natal, Brazil. It began Sunday evening, 12 June 2011, with a Welcome Cocktail hosted by the President of the LI CONJEFAMER, General Juniti Saito, Commander of the Brazilian Air Force and attended by the Brazilian Minister of Defense, Mr. Nelson Jobin, the Commanders of SICOFAA member air forces, the Commanders of observer air forces, their spouses, SICOFAA Delegates, aides, and invited special guests. Mr. Jobin welcomed the invitees with a brief speech. Commanders of 16 of the 18 SICOFAA member air forces were present: Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, United States (VCSAF), and Uruguay. The Commanders from Nicaragua and Venezuela did not attend and Air Force Commanders from two Observer air forces were present: Mexico and Guyana.

The Inaugural Ceremony began at 0900 Monday morning with the traditional trappings of a CONJEFAMER: entrance of dignitaries, singing of Brazilian national

anthem and SICOFAA hymn, and speeches by the Brazilian MOD (Sr. Jobin), the President (General Saito), and the Representative Delegate (General Washington Martinez, Commander of the Uruguayan Air Force). These were followed by the mandatory official photos of Commanders and Delegates.

The 1st Plenary Session, attended by Commanders, Delegates, and aides was gaveled to order by General Saito at 1000 Monday morning. The Secretary General, USAF Colonel Kristian Skinner opened with a summary of resolutions from the previous CONJEFAMER (June 2010, held in Washington DC). He followed with a briefing on the status of SICOFAA funds, giving an account of how the SPS spends the annual dues paid by each member.

Uruguayan Air Force (FAU) Colonel Mariano Rodrigo, followed with an informative briefing on RETIFAA. He explained the purpose of the network is to integrate communications between American navies, armies, and air forces so as to facilitate joint humanitarian assistance operations. He proposed the Commanders approve a study in which advantages and disadvantages of SICOFAA incorporation into RETIFAA would be analyzed.

Vice Commodore Eduardo Gomez, SICOFAA Delegate from Argentina, next gave the Commanders a tour of the 500+ page “SICOFAA COMBINED AIR OPERATIONS MANUAL FOR HUMANITARIAN AID AND AID DURING DISASTERS”, he having played an important role in the writing of the manual. He explained its essential parts:

1. The immediate action checklists. Procedures for use by the air force of the affected country and air forces of the supporting countries to transmit requirements and capabilities via the SICOFAA message network (SITFAA) in preparation for approval of combined humanitarian air operations in the event of a real-world disaster which denies time for combined planning.
2. The coordination flowcharts. Diagrams detailing how coordination, transmittal of information, and movement of resources between the affected air force and the supporting air forces should be accomplished, from the strategic level (government-government) to the operational level, in the event of disaster.
3. The operational organization. Detailed description of the combined organization to be established by the host air force in the affected country. Describes the role of the “Combined/Joint Forces Air Component Commander” (C/JFACC) and his Combined Air Operations Center (CAOC).

4. Exercise documents. Descriptions and examples from Exercise Cooperation I of the three critical documents necessary for planning future SICOFAA combined air operations and exercises: the Preliminary Order (OROPREL), the Operations Plan (OPLAN), and the Support Plan (SUPLAN).
5. Evaluation checklists. Procedures for evaluating SICOFAA combined air operations, used with success in Cooperation I.

Commanders asked questions related to the manual and were pleased with the work done by the Delegates who had dedicated the entire previous cycle to its completion. They were generally enthusiastic to put it to use immediately.

The final briefing of the 1st Plenary Session was presented by Commodore Eduardo Peña of the Chilean Air Force. He first explained the scenario for the exercise: an earthquake resulting in a tsunami which threatened several towns and rural areas in the southern region. He then described the planning and execution of Cooperation I; the function of the groups involved in planning groups and the operational organization (C/JFACC and CAOC) established at the 3rd Air Brigade to Puerto Montt, Chile responsible for the execution of the exercise. For many officers, this was their first experience with a CAOC. He emphasized the results of the exercise, spending considerable time detailing the costs to participating SICOFAA air forces and the FACH. He concluded his briefing by emphasizing several important lessons learned from Cooperation I. Among the most significant were:

1. The need for a common operational software system for exercise participants; a system that can produce the daily air tasking order (ATO) and precisely track the flow of cargo to the various airports in the affected area.
2. The importance for supporting air forces to indicate the passenger and cargo restrictions placed on them by internal policy as soon as possible in the planning process. Cargo and passenger planning for the exercise was based on assumptions that turned out to be untrue as some member air forces arrived in Puerto Montt announcing they could not carry civilian or military passengers during the exercise due to internal restrictions. This necessitated extra missions by the FACH, missions which had not been planned or budgeted.
3. The need for commitment. Several air forces committing aircraft to Cooperation I discovered in the final hour, for various reasons, they would not be able to participate. This unfilled commitment also required additional resources of the FACH.

The 2nd Plenary Session began Tuesday morning, 14 June, at 0900 with a briefing by General Bezerra Racine of the Brazilian Army, Chief of the Brazilian Delegation in the JID (one of the very few times in SICOFAA history an army flag officer had given a brief to the all air force CONJEFAMER). The JID, also realizing the importance of humanitarian assistance, had executed a 'Command Post' exercise at its headquarters in Washington DC in March 2010, "Exercise Humanitarian Support I." General Racine directed the exercise. He had invited the SPS to participate as observers. Colonel Kristian Skinner and Colonel Henry Perez (Subsecretary General, Peruvian Air Force) spent the week with JID officers observing the exercise. Humanitarian Support I had been the JID's first attempt at organizing itself and leveraging its contacts with Ministers of the Organization of American States (OAS) for humanitarian assistance. General Racine concluded in his exercise's lessons learned that it would be beneficial to invite SICOFAA to participate in future JID humanitarian assistance exercises.

Next in the 2nd Session, Secretary General Colonel Skinner presented to the Commanders the elements of the proposed new focus for SICOFAA. He described its three basic elements:

1. More combined air operations and less themes of common interest. He presented a proposed calendar for the next four years with combined air exercises scheduled every other year beginning in 2013, alternating between virtual and live exercises. As budgets are always an issue, Colonel Skinner emphasized that the new SICOFAA focus should not cost anymore than the current 'common theme' based focus. The proposed exercises will be smaller, with fewer participants, and aimed at resolving critical lessons learned from previous exercises. He emphasized that frequent smaller exercises would prepare SICOFAA members more thoroughly for combined humanitarian support operations than would less frequent larger exercises like Cooperation I.
2. A new, more rigorous process for controlling themes of common interest. He presented the new process, approved by PREPLAN Delegates, which requires sponsors of proposed themes to prove to PREPLAN the theme is beneficial to SICOFAA, of mutual interest, and has a sound methodology for accomplishing its objective.
3. Update of SICOFAA Procedures and Evaluation of the SICOFAA Strategic Plan. As SICOFAA transitions to a much more operational organization, its mission, vision and many of its procedures and documents should be re-evaluated for suitability under the new focus. Colonel Skinner briefed

the plan, approved by PREPLAN Delegates, to dedicate four SICOFAA Committee meetings in the coming cycle to updating procedures and evaluating the strategic plan. The Panamanian National Naval Air Service volunteered to direct the evaluation of the strategic plan. This was approved by the Commanders.

The greatest concern for the SPS during the discussions on the new focus for SICOFAA was that CONJEFAMER would see no volunteers to host the future exercises proposed in the plan; without hosts for exercises, the new focus would fail and SICOFAA would return to a common theme status quo. However, to the delight of all in the conference room, before the end of the 2nd Plenary Session the Commanders were discussing volunteering for future exercises. In fact, the Commanders from Argentina (General Normando Costantino) and Peru (General Carlos Samamé) both volunteered to host the next exercise.

Following Colonel Skinner, Colonel Julio Takamura from the Brazilian Air Force, who served as President of the LI PREPLAN in May in the Dominican Republic, presented the official recommendations from the PREPLAN for the Commanders. Each of the recommendations was considered for approval by the Commanders in the closed-door Executive Session which followed the 2nd Plenary Session.

Executive Session

CONJEFAMER procedures require a Commanders-only session, in which decisions are made based on the recommendations from PREPLAN. SICOFAA protocol calls for all Delegates, Observers, Special Invitees, aides, and other personnel to leave the conference room in preparation for the Executive Session. Only the SICOFAA Commanders, Secretary General, Subsecretary General, and PREPLAN President remain in the room. The SPS prepares carefully the entire year for this 2-3 hour session which signifies the end of the current SICOFAA cycle and in which direct and frank discussions between the decision makers take place. These discussions lead to the decisions and ‘marching orders’ for SICOFAA that will be executed during the coming cycle.

The Commanders considered and acted upon the following issues:

1. Use of the just completed “SICOFAA COMBINED AIR OPERATIONS MANUAL FOR HUMANITARIAN AID AND AID DURING DISASTERS.” The Commanders unanimously approved the use of the manual for planning future exercises and responding to real world operations, with the understanding that in the near future, after it has been used in planning exercises, they would consider official approval of the manual. They acknowledged the extraordinary labor performed by the Delegates and other air force experts to complete the manual in one SICOFAA cycle. Some

Commanders opined that the manual should be approved immediately, not simply the use of the manual. However, the opinion that prevailed recognized that official approval of the manual should wait until the manual had been used to successfully plan at least one future exercise.

2. The New Focus. All Commanders agreed with the basic tenet of the new focus for SICOFAA: more exercises, less themes. They demonstrated their enthusiasm for this transition from the old to the new by unanimously approving the proposal to update SICOFAA processes, evaluate the strategic plan, and implement the new process for control of common themes.
3. To the pleasant surprise of the Secretary and Subsecretary Generals, the Commanders showed no hesitation in expanding the System's 'jointness' by allowing the participation of the SPS in future JID humanitarian support exercises and by approving extending an invitation to the CEA and CNI to all future SICOFAA exercises. They also mandated the Argentina and Uruguayan Air Force work together to complete a study of the advantages and disadvantages of SICOFAA membership in RETIFAA, and report the results in next year's CONJEFAMER.
4. The LI CONJEFAMER saw the incorporation of a new member for the first time in nearly two decades, when the Commanders, without objection, approved the ascension of the Air Corps of the Guyana Self Defence Force from 'Observer' to the status of official SICOFAA 'Member.'
5. Demonstrating their understanding of the key lesson learned from Cooperation I, the Commanders assigned to the USAF the task of recommending the most viable option for obtaining a common C2 software system for eventual use by all SICOFAA members in exercises and real world operations.
6. Next the Commanders considered the calendars for future SICOFAA events. In the LI PREPLAN, the delegates had looked ahead four years, agreeing on SICOFAA activities through the completion of the 2014-2015 cycle. The Delegates' calendar called for a SICOFAA virtual exercise in 2013 (dubbed Cooperation II), followed by a live exercise in 2014 (Cooperation III). The Commanders, loaded with enthusiasm for the new focus, unanimously agreed to accelerate this schedule. Many wanted to initiate the cycle of exercises immediately. However, realizing the depth of planning involved and comprehending the desire to test the new common C2 software in the next exercise, they reluctantly agreed to delay Exercise Cooperation II until

April 2013. However, having agreed to realize the virtual exercise in 2013, they would not countenance waiting two years to hold the live one. Scrambling the Delegates' calendar, the Commanders insisted the live exercise be held one year later, in April 2014. Since Argentina's Commander General Costantino, volunteered just before Peru's Commander General Samamé, it was decided that Argentina will host Cooperation II (virtual) in April 2013 and Peru will host the Cooperation III (live-fly) in April 2014. The Commanders next decided to link the two exercises, decreeing the 2013 Argentina Cooperation II (virtual) would use a Peruvian scenario, as a warm-up for the 2014 Cooperation III (live) in Peru.

After some lengthy pauses for calendar adjustments, for the first time in the history of CONJEFAMER the Commanders approved SICOFAA activities for four years in advance, creating a vision for the future to which they were each committed to bring about. The following are the highlights of the next four years for SICOFAA. They clearly reflect the new focus: more exercises, less themes.

The highlights of each of the four future cycles approved by the Commanders are as follows.

2011-2012 Cycle

1. Complete an evaluation of the SICOFAA strategic plan and identify processes to update.
2. Identify requirements and appropriate options for a SICOFAA common C2 software system.
3. Study advantages and disadvantages of RETIFAA membership for SICOFAA.
4. Begin initial planning for exercise Cooperation II (virtual).
5. Report results to Commanders in LII CONJEFAMER in Canada in June 2012.

2012-2013 Cycle

1. Exercise Cooperation II (virtual) in Argentina in April 2013. Three prior committees dedicated to planning the exercise and one committee after to evaluate the exercise.
2. Report results to Commanders in LIII CONJEFAMER in Chile in July 2013.

2013-2014 Cycle

1. Exercise Cooperation III (live-fly) in Peru in April 2014. Three prior committees prior dedicated to planning the exercise and committee after to evaluate the exercise.

2. Report results to Commanders in LIV CONJEFAMER in US in June 2014.

2014-2015 Cycle

1. Update the “SICOFAA COMBINED AIR OPERATIONS MANUAL FOR HUMANITARIAN AID AND AID DURING DISASTERS” based on experience from Exercises Cooperation II and III.
2. Common themes approved by Commanders in previous LIV CONJEFAMER.
3. Report results of Manual updates and common themes to Commanders in LV CONJEFAMER in Bolivia in June 2015.

Conclusions

The closing ceremony provided a fitting conclusion to the entire year’s work accomplished by the Delegates and Commanders. During the closing ceremony the newest SICOFAA member was recognized and Lt Col Cargill Kyte, Commander of the Guyanese Air Corps was called forward to witness the movement of the Guyanese flag from its position among the Observers to its new position among the SICOFAA Members.

This closing ceremony appropriately capped probably the most significant SICOFAA cycle in the System’s 50-year history. The 2010-2011 cycle witnessed momentous accomplishments by the members. The first ever SICOFAA combined exercise, Exercise Cooperation I, was successfully realized in southern Chile in October 2010. Motivated by Cooperation I, the Delegates completed SICOFAA’s first combined humanitarian support procedures, the “*SICOFAA COMBINED AIR OPERATIONS MANUAL FOR HUMANITARIAN AID AND AID DURING DISASTERS*” and received Commanders approval to use it in planning future exercises. Finally, and perhaps most significant of all, Delegates worked to define and the Commanders approved a “new focus” for SICOFAA, putting in motion a transition from its sedentary past centered on relation building to its future as an organization ready to take advantage of the integration and relations built over the previous fifty years, an organization dedicated to combined air operations in humanitarian support. In this coming 2011-2012 cycle the Delegates will begin to acquire the tools (common C2 software) and make the organizational and process changes (new strategic plan) necessary to realize this “new focus”. In addition, SICOFAA will expand its horizons to include cooperation in humanitarian support with its joint American partners in the Army and Navy. In future years Commanders, Delegates, and friends of SICOFAA, reflecting on the importance of SICOFAA to the people of the Americas, will remember the LI CONJEFAMER in Natal, Brazil as the moment the System began its transition to become a reliable partner in humanitarian support for the people of the Americas.

Contributer

Colonel Kristian D. Skinner received his commission from the United States Air Force in 1981. He was an F-16 pilot for more than twenty years. In 1966 he graduated from the Venezuela Air Force Air War College and was an F-16 exchange pilot with the Venezuelan Air Force (FAV) until 1977. He was commander of the 56th Operations Group, Luke AFB, AZ, from 1998-2000 and commander, 98th Operations Group, Nellis AFB, NV, from 2003-2005. Col Skinner was Chief Air Force Mission, US Military Group, Colombia, from 2001-2003 and Director of the AFSOUTH Air Component Coordination Element (ACCE) in Colombia from 2005-2010. Since January 2010 he has been SICOFAA's Secretary General. Colonel Skinner and his wife, Carolina, have seven children and three grandchildren.